

# THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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## Post-War Literature Courses

Unless I am much mistaken there will be after the war a strong demand for greater emphasis on American Literature. The Survey of British Literature to which in many colleges two semesters are devoted has aroused increasing dissatisfaction, and to try to extend it to cover a Survey of American Literature as well would be even more unsatisfactory, almost as much of an educational gold brick as are World Literature courses. After all there are limits to thinness of treatment.

Would it perhaps be practical to devote the introductory year in literature to selected British and American authors, abandoning the attempt to present the development of literature, and omitting books whose importance is mainly historical, to give our attention to material of living interest today?

A possible choice would be as follows:

Chaucer as potentially the most popular of all English authors once his language is even superficially acquired; I suppose the Prologue would be the inevitable selection.

Then Shakespeare, a comedy and a tragedy.

Not Spenser or Jonson or Dryden or Milton except as noted below. Really to enjoy them one must read enough to become more or less at home in their world. A little acquaintance is only likely to repel.

A little Bacon; the Fight of the Revenge; a little Pepys; an abridged Pilgrim's Progress.

Pope's Essay on Man; part of Gulliver; a few essays by Addison and Steele; a little Boswell; at least two or three pages from Burke. The cult of the complete classic should be abandoned. We have lost the benefits of Burke's wisdom which we sorely need today because we insisted on including all the dead stuff in his Speech on Conciliation.

It would be sensible to leave out novels and plays, but if they must be included there would be Robinson Crusoe, Tom Jones, and The Vicar of Wakefield and The School for Scandal or The Rivals.

Then there should be a selection of the most important short poems in English, playing down the metaphysical poets now being emphasized by some of our too intellectual critics, for the poetry which has really reached the Anglo-Saxon heart even if that heart is a little soft.

The Americans to be represented would be Franklin, Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman, Thoreau and Mark Twain. Space is not available to list the nineteenth century British writers. But this is enough to show the basis of selection.

I cannot think of a better topic for general discussion next year than the adjustment of courses in English to the needs, interests, and changed mental outlook of the returning soldier. We failed to do that last time. I was one of those that failed; but I was more aware of my failures than most, because I had been abroad and in close contact with the war throughout 1918. This time, our colleges and universities will be theaters for adult education. I am told that Yale expects its two upper classes to be made up, substantially, of veterans. The old lectures and recitations, the old philosophic approach of courses in the humanities, simply will not do. I do not

mean that they were wrong: I mean that a factor of communication between teacher and taught will have definitely changed. Nor will the returning soldiers know what they want. I expect myself, at the college level, a surprising demand for the humanities. But as every foreign masterpiece has to be retranslated every generation, so all our materials for humanism will have to be adjusted to new interpretations. I find, after the ethical shifts and volcanic conflicts and the undermining of confidence in the last few years, I cannot myself read an old book in quite the old way.

Henry S. Canby.

## Presidential Message

Lehigh's 190 Air Corps Reservists (ASTRP) have revealed new low levels of high school certified illiteracy. Remembering the shock the first ill-educated ASTP's had given us last summer, we looked forward to teaching the Air Corps Reservists, carefully screened and graded, and fresh from their high school training. We expected them to be about the equal of average-to-superior civilian freshmen.

The first theme disillusioned us. Even liberal grading gave F or D to 60.2 percent of the papers. Ten and twelve misspelled words to the page were common. Errors in case ("Us fellows bought him a watch."), in agreement of pronoun and antecedent ("Everyone made their report . . ."), and in agreement of subject and verb ("There is several reasons why") occurred over and over. A high school graduate with a four-year English average above eighty wrote:

He was purty hansom and had away with women.

Similar in two ways was the sentence of another student:

He seeked new adventures in the way of women.

Many of the reservists lack the simplest grasp of American idiom. The son of American parents, lacking any excuse of foreign background, wrote:

That wasn't all he was interested in because he also had deep intensions in aviation. This explains for his being in the Air Corps.

Most of the men lack the ability to reduce their thoughts to clear relationships simply expressed. They write such sentences as this:

When I seen the topic of our theme, "A Character Sketch," I immediate thought of an old man when I was a very young boy.

And this:

You would think that if a son of yours made such achievements in life against the hardships he was up against, you would think his father owed him quite a bit but it just doesn't work that way.

The reservists are no better trained in reading to grasp ideas than they are in writing to express them. Yet most of these students report having been in the upper third or half of their class, with grades generally above eighty or its equivalent. What ability to use their native tongue is possessed by the other half or two-thirds? What standards of clearness, correctness, and good usage have our high schools been demanding? What is the value of a high school diploma?

These and similar questions are pertinent for the colleges and universities which will have the job of educating the thousands of high school graduates who originally

(Continued on Page 4)

## A SUGGESTION FROM THE SECRETARY

In our formal education, dealing with groups rather than individuals has led us to screen our students; and teachers are trained to deal with large numbers of young people who supposedly have all arrived at the same point at the same time in the same studies, to work with them as far as the next way-station, and then to turn them over to another counselor and guide.

War-time conditions have upset all the old gradings at the "college level". Teachers are facing now, and will continue to face groups which have been screened for war, and not for formal education. The old devices will not work well; many of the old patterns have to be scrapped. Only the fundamental problem remains: where does the individual student stand on the long road, and how

can we help him go forward?

This is a time for free, frank and frequent exchange of experiences and suggestions among teachers; and it is a time when transportation conditions prevent us from getting together. Even regional conferences over a large area are unsatisfactory, if they are only gatherings of delegates. But where two or three undergraduate colleges are within easy reach of one another, their English teachers should all share experiences and discuss common problems. This Association will gladly assist in any way within its power to bring about such meetings, whether or not those concerned are within its membership. The CEA is not concerned about itself so much as about better teaching.

Such a course would give students training in reading, an ability they increasingly lack; it could be trimmed down within necessary limits without stultifying its purpose as the Survey cannot be; and it would recognize American interests in our basic course, which ought to be concerned with the basic patterns of our culture. Of course it would be a makeshift and I am not sure that it would prove workable or even desirable. But we confront a real problem.

What I think necessary is to resist any attempt to bury literature in some blanket "humanities" course, or combine it with the social sciences or even with the other arts, though both history and the arts are admirable as supporting subjects. Unless we insist on belles lettres as an independent and primary subject of study, the ability to read aesthetically is going to become a lost accomplishment. It is almost that now.

George F. Reynolds,  
University of Colorado.

## NOTICE

President Canby has appointed the following Nominating Committee to prepare a slate for submission to members, who will vote by mail in December. Officers to be elected are a president, two vice-presidents, and three directors to succeed Wm. C. DeVane, Elizabeth Manwaring and W. O. Syphard whose terms expire; and one to fill out the term of Theodore Morrison, resigned. Members are urged to send suggestions to any member of the Committee, keeping in mind geographical distribution.

Thomas O. Mabbott, chairman, Hunter College, 695 Park Ave., N. Y. City; Professors J. L. Vaughan, Univ. of Virginia; Benjamin Boyce, Municipal University of Omaha; Amanda Ellis, Colorado College; Amy V. Hall, University of Washington.

## THE NEWS LETTER

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## For a Moratorium on The Confusionists

How about a moratorium on talk about confusion in education? Pick up almost any periodical these days, and there is an article starting out telling all the world in mournful accents that education, especially liberal education, is in a mess. Go to a meeting or chat with your colleagues: it is likely to be the same story. Liberal education is in the doldrums; it has been dealt a body blow by the war and is languishing on like a wounded soul in an oxygen tent, with who knows how many days yet to survive. After the war, vocational education will be all the fashion: the poor liberal arts, all dressed up and no place to go! One hears that the returning soldiers will demand the quick and direct route to a job: no literature, or history, or languages for them. Or that if anyone at all wants the humanities he will want them in a new dress, in a drastically revised curriculum, under new conditions, with all new methods. None of the old stuff; no sir, none of the old stuff at all.

Along with this, we learn that the mess and confusion we are in is all our own fault. We haven't known what we were about, and we haven't believed in our own subjects, have been perfunctory and scholarly and dry rather than human and alive. And we are told the dire conditions under which we may perchance survive—if we stir ourselves soon enough and hard enough in the direction of new ways and new habits of thought. Sackcloth and ashes tears for the teacher of literature. Penance, contrition, expiation and reform for all of us. Or else the inevitable reward: eclipse, oblivion, dust to dust!

And hearing all this, I am awear, awear. Aren't we all? Shouldn't we all be? The thing to be feared most in the world is fear itself. The surest way to lose the confidence of others is to lose faith in ourselves. And loss of faith is the signpost to failure. When a political party wants to put its opponents out of business, it deliberately sets out to create distrust. Night and day, year after year, the words 'blundering' and 'confusion' and 'muddling' and 'failure' are dinned into the minds of people until they believe what they hear. But in liberal education we wait for no opposition party to point up our sins. We face a world crisis; we are shocked into greater awareness; we see we are not perfect; and we fall into a fit of panic and an orgy of self-accusation.

Well, it is all right to be shocked occasionally. We aren't perfect, and we should know it. We ought to have known it anyway; we ought to have been doing something about healing our sores; and we ought to keep doing it now, with whatever aid new light from the war may bring. It is one of the facts of life that great crises tend to reveal truth with terrible clarity. But pessimism about our condition, no. A

yielding to an impulse to confusion, no. Let us keep our heads, and keep our faith. Ours is a great subject, and we can learn to teach it better. But whether we do or not, the post-war generation, I predict, is going to give its share of attention to literature. It will have need for the comfort and light and wisdom that are in great books, and we should hold ourselves ready to give and to interpret. I do not know how to explain it, but in my own school from October to March of the current year, though the enrollment in our college decreased one-fourth, the number of students concentrating in English went up ten per cent. In the same period some of the more "practical" subjects lost rather heavily. Whatever the cause, here is one little fact that appears to controvert the calamity-boys. And after the war, there is no reason to believe that it will be different. It was not after 1918; there was no boycotting of humane education then. In natural reaction to the deadly business of warfare, young men may turn gladly to the civilizing influences of the humanities. No one knows of course. But in the meantime confusion to the confusionists; and as for the rest of us, let us keep our chins up and our defenses in good order.

Clarence D. Thorpe,  
University of Michigan.

## Vanderbilt Conference On the Humanities

At Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, was held during the week July 24-29 the second of a series of conferences on the humanities by representatives of about thirty colleges and universities in the Southeast, including the state of Texas. An earlier meeting, called at the instance of a humanities group at Vanderbilt, and attended by a smaller group from the same area, in November 1943, had worked out a general plan for the summer conference and had assigned a variety of special investigations and projects to individuals or sub-committees. Both meetings received financial aid from the Rockefeller Foundation.

The theme of the conference was, and still is, "The Humanities—their opportunities and obligations in higher education in a democracy," in which the term "the Humanities" is taken to mean "those disciplines traditionally so denominated in American colleges," including history and philosophy.

The July conference divided its labors and discussions among five major topics, each topic receiving attention at two daily sessions: I. Place and function of the humanities in liberal education, II. Subject-matter appropriate to the achievement of these aims, III. Organization of the humanities program for achieving these aims, IV. Problems of instruction incident to achieving these aims, V. The place of the humanities in American higher education.

Details of the re-adjudication  
(Continued on Page 4)

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**CERTIFIED ILLITERACY**

(Continued from Page 1)

nally did not plan to go to college but after the war will take advantage of the G. I. Bill of Rights to get college training at government expense. In a much larger sense these questions and their answers are the concern of every taxpayer who supports the public schools, of every citizen who believes that a sound democracy can be maintained only by an educated electorate. How sound is our education when even high school graduates, with two years' more formal training than the average citizen, cannot really read or write?

Glenn J. Christensen.  
Lehigh University.

**VANDERBILT CONFERENCE ON THE HUMANITIES**

(Continued from Page 3)

et gestae may be of interest to readers of *The News Letter*. "Some of the qualities to be conferred upon the individual by a study of the humanities are enjoyment, breadth, judgment, and strength." "The program of liberal education implies that the greatest need of American life is a certain type of man . . . Formal education can only begin to produce such a man . . . The humanities are only a part of this inclusive educational purpose."

With regard to subject-matter, the English teacher should "keep in mind the fact that literature is a depository of man's attempt to express his emotional life, his spiritual nature, and his relationships to man. He should attempt to enlighten and humanize in such a manner as to facilitate the immediate transfer of intellectual and spiritual values to the student's life relationships . . . The study of language is essential to the full appreciation of literature . . . The student should at some time . . . have an adequate course in American literature. The department of English must recognize the importance of acquaintance with other literatures." Offerings in the fine arts should be made available.

In the teaching of foreign languages, tested new methods of instruction should be freely accepted. Consideration should be given to the desirability of establishing somewhere in the South a center for the study of Asiatic languages. Philosophy "should be an attitude which permeates the entire college program," but it should be made available also as a discipline. "For the fullest realization of humanistic values . . . religion will often need to be studied as a separately organized body of subject-matter. History should "show the student his own place in society and inform him about the forces, including ideas, which have made him what he is and created the society in which he is to live."

The Conference assumed as fundamental principles (1) that the curriculum of the liberal arts college should be made for the student, not the student re-made for the curriculum, but that the faculty as a whole, not student whims and fads, should determine

it. "The liberal arts college should be restored to its former authority and integrity as an instrument for helping to educate the complete human personality, not the specialist, the professional, or the tradesman. All liberal arts subjects, properly taught, are humanistic, and they should be so taught." The average ratio of time devoted to the humanities in Southern institutions is too low; at least fifty per cent of the programs for the first two years should be devoted to humanities subjects, should be largely prescribed, and should be taught for their humanistic values, not merely as tool subjects.

The Conference could not agree on a prescription for the junior-senior years; but did go on record as urging that every student be directed into as many of the humanistic disciplines as may be consonant with a well-integrated program for his special needs; professed faith in a plastic and flexible long-range plan of study; and pleaded for more liberal, less departmentalized organization and administration of the curriculum. An acceptable minimum list of required courses would include: one year of English composition and one year of English literature, a general literature, or a humanistic-survey course; one year of history; and sufficient training in at least one foreign language (ancient or modern) to enable the student to carry to successful completion a course in the literature of that language and to demonstrate capacity to use the language in other fields of study. The Conference recorded its approval of consideration of and experimentation with various types of courses surveying the humanities, some of which have been tried and reported upon.

Several policies and practices for taking care of the needs of both inferior and superior students were described, and these were recommended to the Conference institutions for consideration. Discussion of "Problems of Instruction" eventuated in agreement on the qualifications of the teacher of the humanities—one "who, through native endowment, education, vital social living, and professional growth, has achieved for himself the goals of humanistic education . . . a practising humanist with the passion and the power to humanize others"; on the philosophy and emphasis of a teaching process centered in the individual because "mass education in the humanities is impossible"; and on various types of teaching methods designed as far as possible to individualize instruction and test achievement above the level of information and memory.

The fifty-odd representatives of thirty colleges and universities in the South left Nashville not so much with a feeling of satisfaction over things done—for few matters could be settled—as with a hope that an esprit had been engendered and an organization effected that may secure for the humanities their rightful place and opportunity in the postwar South.

—Arthur Palmer Hudson,  
University of North Carolina.

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